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ABSTRACT

A longitudinal study focused on a weekly writing workshop for a group of active older adults ranging in age from 67-91. The core group consisted of 14 elders. The research that explored elders' literacy confirmed the importance of its social nature and its grounding in specific cultural and historical contexts; varying perceptions and uses of literacy; and various reasons for writing. The workshop followed a flexible, yet regular pattern: talking and telling stories about their lives, past and present, and current events and then reading what individuals had written during the week. Through more talk, the workshop explored the new topic--one of those discussed or one suggested by the workshop leader. Information for the study was gathered through observations, field notes, informal and more formal interviews, copies of elders' writing, and participants' 1-week literacy audits. A complex and impressive range of reading demonstrated the individual and social complexity of reading. Writing for the workshop included a variety of discourse forms. Outside of these pieces, the most common forms of writing were personal letters and greeting cards. The workshop served as a catalyst for extended writing, contributed to the reading of a range of different texts, and became a source of connections, friendships, and community. The workshop allowed elders to explore their lives and gave them a purpose. (Contains 34 references.) (YLB)

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"A Gathering of Individuals": A Longitudinal Study of a Writing Workshop for Older Adults

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Abstract

"A Gathering of Individuals": A Longitudinal Study of a Writing Workshop for Older Adults

This is a longitudinal study of a weekly writing workshop for a small group of active older adults ranging in age from sixty-seven to ninety-one. The author first surveys what research shows concerning elders' literacy. Second, he describes the particular elders in the present study, their functions and uses of literacy, and the nature of the writing workshop. Third, he highlights the impact of the workshop upon the elders. Fourth, he discusses the possible implications of his findings for similar groups. Lastly, he cites the need for further qualitative and context-specific research into the reading and writing of older adults.

Introduction

Among the adult literacy community there is relatively little interest in the reading and writing of the elderly. The questions that Rigg and Kazemek (1983) raised more than a decade ago concerning elders' literacy still need to be addressed. This paper highlights one attempt to give us a glimpse into the writing and reading of a particular group of old folks. In it I describe an eighteen-month-long and presently on-going weekly writing workshop with a group of active and independent elders varying in number from fourteen to sixteen and ranging in age from sixty-seven to ninety-one.

I have arranged the paper in the following manner: 1) What do we know in general about elders' writing and reading? 2) Who are the particular elders involved in the present study? 3) What does our writing workshop look like? 4) How did I gather information concerning the elders' literacy functions and uses? 5) What did I find? 6) What impact does the writing workshop have on the elders' writing and reading? 7) How does the writing workshop affect their personal lives and psychological well-being? 8) What implications might this study have for promoting writing and reading among other groups of elders?

Literacy & Elders: What Do We Know?

Contrary to the Western stereotype of the isolated individual reader, recent research has shown that "not only is all reading socially embedded, but indeed a great deal of reading is done in social groups" (Boyarin, 1993, p. 4). Similarly, various studies have highlighted the social and communal nature of writing. (See, for example, Peck, Flower, & Higgins, 1995 and Woodrow & Norton, 1996.) Moreover, psychologists following Vygotsky (1978) have stressed the social, cultural, and historical contexts which shape individual lives. In his exploration of the relationship between literacy and the mind, Olson contends that "the intellectual development of children be seen, at least in part, as the acquisition of symbolic and representational systems of the culture" (Olson, 1995, p. 95). Literacy is a social and cultural practice (Luke, 1991; Purcell-Gates, 1995).

Although not extensive, the body of research which explores elders' literacy confirms the importance of its social nature and its grounding in specific cultural and historical contexts. Like younger adults, elders[1] use reading and writing for a variety of personal purposes including leisure time entertainment, personal renewal, and improvement of consumer wisdom (Weinstein-Shr, 1995). However, the social purposes of literacy are equally salient. Elders use reading

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[1] Gerontologists often categorize those in the 65-74 age group as "young-old"; those 75-84 as "old-old"; and those who are 85 and older as "very-old."

and writing to help them connect to and cope with others in particular contexts, for example, family members and friends (Weinstein-Shr,1995; Kasworm, 1982; Kaminsky, 1985).

Also like younger adults, elders' perceptions and uses of literacy vary according to their socio-economic status, background, level of education, and specific cultural context. Kasworm and Medina (1989, p. 76) observe that the "viability of literacy in the senior years is highly dependent upon the person's frame of reference, social context, self-education activities, and age life in context." Moreover, Kasworm and Medina go on to stress that the habits of literacy among the elderly reflect those they established throughout their lives. Finally, health and living conditions "play a significant role in older adults' reading practices" (Smith, 1993, p. 426).

Interest surveys show that elders like to read newspapers, magazines, mysteries, and relgious and inspirational texts (Fisher, 1990; Scales, 1996; Scales & Biggs, 1987; Smith, 1993). However, like all such surveys (usually involving relatively small numbers of participants), these interests reflect particular individuals in particular contexts. It is difficult to generalize to the population as a whole. Elders' reading practices, with the obvious exception of work-related materials, probably are as various as those of younger adults. Smith (1993, p. 426) maintains that "much more needs to be learned about the everyday reading activities of these adults because such

knowledge can be helpful in informing the general public about the richness of the intellectual activities of older persons."

Likewise, elders write for a variety of reasons. Fisher (1990), for example, found the nursing home residents in his study used writing primarily for correspondence. Among another group of nursing home residents, Becker, Blumenfield, and Gordon (1984, p. 91) found writing centered around the "need to remember being loved in the past and to feel loved today." Reminiscences and personal narratives are central in many of the writing workshops and classes for elders (Kaminsky, 1984; Koch, 1977; Manheimer, 1989). The poet-social worker Marc Kaminsky says that in his writing workshops with elders he hears a "kind of chorus that sums things up" (Kaminsky, 1985, p. 277).

Kaminsky goes on to say that elders write to continue learning; to draw upon unused skills and knowledge; to return to and explore roads not taken in life; to communicate with others; to become more observant; to imagine; and to transmit their life experiences to family and those who come after them (Kaminsky, 1985). The growth in recent years of writing classes for elders offered by community college extension programs and similar Elderhostel programs (Watkins, 1989) support Kaminsky's observations. (I found in a quick check on the World Wide Web that during spring 1997 Elderhostel is offering twenty-five different writing courses in locations from Florida to British Columbia.)

Elders in the Present Study

The elders with whom I have been working for the past eighteen months are all European-Americans and range in age from 67 to 91. Our core group consists of fourteen elders, ten women and four men, and over the past year-and-a-half another five or six individuals have drifted in and out of our meetings. None of them is in a nursing home or minimal care facility. They all live independently and are physically able to come to the community center at least once a week for our writing group. They all are retired.

Most of the elders in this study have lived their lives in the small towns or on family farms in the upper Midwest. A few have gone away to college or to service in World War II, and a few have lived at times in the city, but all of them consider themselves to be small town or rural folks. One eighty-eight-year-old member of our group was born in our town of 7,000 when it was little more than a village.

The elders had diverse working careers: four were homemakers and farmer's wives; one a beautician; one a nurse's aide; one worked in a laundry; one a social worker; another a clerk at the country courthouse; another a mortician; one a farmer and laborer; another a security guard among other occupations; and two had

retired from teaching. In addition to the two retired teachers, four of the other women had at one time in their lives worked as teachers in one-room schools. Gert, for example, taught in a one-room school after completing "two six-week methods courses at the Teacher's College in 1921."

The elders have named themselves the "Senior Class," and that is how they are now known at the community center and among others in the larger community. All of them are active in a variety of ways. For example, with a couple of exceptions, they all attend church services regularly if not weekly. They serve on blood drive committees and groups attempting to raise money for our parks and schools. Some belong to craft groups, service organizations, singing and other musical groups, and one man volunteers as a driver for other elders. Two of them visit elementary schools and talk to children on occasion.

The elders in this study do not represent a random sampling. I make no claims for generalizing beyond this group although I think that some of my findings will be useful to others doing literacy work with older adults. Eighteen months ago I simply put up a notice in the community center asking if anyone would be interested in forming a weekly writing group. The center director also contacted various individuals she thought might be interested. Thus, the Senior Class members are all self-selected volunteers, but as I will show later in the paper not all of them were active writers before

joining the group. And therein is what I believe to be one of my important findings.

The Weekly Writing Workshop

The community center in which we hold our weekly writing workshop is a gathering place for many elders in town. They come to meet friends, chat, play pool and card games, put together puzzles, work at various crafts, sing, and participate in other special events. Some elders come only for the daily hot lunch and then leave. In its more than five years of existence, there had been no writing workshop at the center until I proposed one.

The weekly workshop follows a flexible yet regular pattern that emerged early in our interactions with one another. Each session typically runs for an hour to an hour and a half, but at times we have met for more than two hours. We begin by talking and telling stories about our lives, both past and present. We might spend ten minutes discussing some event, incident, or memory that someone mentions or that is seasonally current or prominent in the news. For example, springtime fostered tales of gardening and childhood, and the O.J. Simpson trials led to discussions of race relationships.

These discussions and stories often guide our writing; however, at times the elders turn to me as the workshop leader for suggested

topics. I come to each session prepared with a possible topic and often a catalyst story or poem. I try to identify these themes from the elders' conversations, comments, interests, and writings from previous sessions. For example, the death of loved ones and friends and one's own relatively imminent death (especially at 91) is a theme that weaves itself through all of our sessions. Thus, on one occasion I mentioned that we might write about death and dying. The elders enthusiastically agreed to this suggestion, and this led to some of their strongest and most poignant writing.

After this opening discussion and telling of stories, we read what we have written during the week. All of the members of the group are eager to have others hear and comment on their efforts. At times individuals prefer not to share what they have written, and that right is respected by all. No one is pressured to read what s/he has written. Generally, one or two comments are made by others in appreciation of a piece. I usually try to offer one specific comment on each work, for example, "I like your use of concrete visual language; it helps me to see what you're writing about."

After the sharing of our writing, we begin to explore through more talk the new topic for the week. Sometimes this discussion and storytelling will last the rest of our meeting, and then we will take home the ideas we have and work on our new piece during the week. Sometimes, however, we spend ten or fifteen minutes jotting down ideas and words, sketching some scheme or outline, of just diving right into the new piece. Then, if there is time, we will share what

we've started or what we're thinking about. These written ideas, sketches, and notes are valuable to the elders as they are writing alone at home.

Some of the strategies that have been successful with this group of elders include the following. I have shared catalyst texts, including stories, non-fiction, poems, and magazine articles, which have led to writing about specific objects, people, and critical events in our lives. Various kinds of form poetry, for example, haiku, cinquain, and rhymed couplets, have been popular with all of the elders. Music from the past, for example, "Beautiful Dreamer," has resulted in meditative prose and poetry. Our mutual storytelling has led to brief vignettes about memorable people we've known; family customs; family stories; jobs we've held; unexplainable events in our lives; childhood games and exploits; and, since we're in Minnesota, the weather. Lastly, certain universal themes have resulted in some of the elder's most passionate writing, for example, birth, loss, death and dying, love, compassion, and forgiveness.

In concluding this description of our weekly writing workshop, it is important to note that I write with the elders and share my efforts with them. However, I also serve as a teacher and group facilitator. During each session I try to include a brief discussion of the writer's craft. For example, I've done brief mini-lessons on how to gain some psychological distance in a piece of writing by shifting from first to third person; how to entice a reader with a strong opening sentence; how and when to end a piece; how to use more

descriptive language; how to enliven a piece with dialogue; and how to avoid excessive passive voice.

How I Gathered My Information

I have gathered and continue to gather data for this on-going project through techniques typically associated with participant-observer research. My field notes include observations and comments from the elders that I record during each session. I reflect in my data journal on each session as soon as feasibly possible; generally, this is during the evening of the workshop day, but occasionally it isn't until a couple of days later. Since I have become personal friends with several of the elders, I have been able to discuss with them literacy-related issues, their perceptions of the workshop, and my perceptions of what occurs during our workshops. These discussions have taken place on different occasions and in informal settings, for example, over dinner at a local restaurant.

Moreover, I have gathered information from both informal and more formal interviews with a variety of individuals not directly involved in the workshops. These people include the community center director with whom I meet regularly; spouses who are not members of the writing group; several children of the elders; and fifth-grade children with whom we have done several intergenerational projects.

In addition to copies of all the elders' writing during the last eighteen months, both final drafts and many rough drafts, I have asked the elders on three separate occasions to keep a one-week literacy audit for me. These audits contain all that they read and wrote for a week. I asked them to complete the form I gave them at the end of each day; realistically speaking, however, I know from conversations that sometimes they would forget and then fill in, say, Monday's section on Tuesday or Wednesday. Thus, the audits provide only a rough guide of their reading and writing. I believe that they undercount the amount and kinds of reading and writing the elders do, especially in terms of functional and environmental print.

Reading and Writing by the Senior Class

Reading

The quantity and kinds of reading done by the elders in the Senior Class differ significantly from those of older adults reported in much larger studies. For example, if we compare the reading practices of the Senior Class to the large sample of adults 65 and older in the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), we find that this small group is atypical. Smith's (1996, p. 201) analysis of the NALS data shows that "older adults were more likely than middle-aged and younger adults to demonstrate lower PDQ [prose, document, quantitiative] proficiencies," that is, their proficiency reading in five content areas: newspapers, books, magazines, personal documents, and work documents.

What kind of reading did I find among the elders in the Senior Class? I found a complex and impressive range of reading that clearly demonstrates the individual and social complexity of reading among any group of people, elder or otherwise. Their reading highlights the multiple functions and uses of literacy in our society. Modifying somewhat the five NALS content areas, I synthesized the elders reading into the following categories: books; magazines; newspapers; daily functional and environmental print; letters; church-related texts; and other texts. Let's look at these categories.

Books: During the eighteen months of our group's existence, all of the elders reported reading one or more works of fiction. These included romance novels, especially those by Barbara Cartland; westerns, especially those by Louis L'Amour; various mysteries, with Tony Hillerman's name and titles being mentioned; best sellers such as The Firm ; more "literary" works by writers like Jane Smiley and Muriel Sparks; condensed Reader's Digest novels; and children's books, such as Wind in the Willows, read to grandchildren.

Informational books were not as prominent; the elders tended to read magazines and newspapers. Some of the non-fiction books that they did report reading included a history of folk music; a book on country schools in Minnesota; an account of Scandinavian immigrants in the upper Midwest; a local history of a town's 100th anniversary; the Bible; and several religious and inspirational books.

Various other books were shared among members of the group as a direct result of our weekly meetings. These were books that I or others brought in and then were read by others, for example, collections of oral histories, the poetry of Robert Frost, and a book of short stories. I will discuss in detail this reading, and writing, in the next section, "Impact of the Weekly Writing Workship."

Magazines: All of the elders reported reading magazines, and the magazines read reflected particular interests and backgrounds. The veterans in the group read the American Legion magazine. Those involved in arts and crafts read magazines specifically related to fiber arts and tole painting. Those active in service organizations read such things as the magazine published by the Elks. Those who were members of Minnesota Public Radio read its monthly magazine, Minnesota Monthly. One woman (as slim as a rail) read the magazine published by Weight Watchers; she said she read it for the nutritional information. And, of course, for folks at this age, Arthritis Today was read by two members of the Senior Class.

There were other general interest titles that more than one elder reported reading on a regular basis. These included: Reader's Digest; National Geographic; Country Living; Modern Maturity; and, of course, the omnipresent People. I found it interesting that no one reported reading, and no one ever mentioned in our workshops, such popular weekly news magazines as Time or Newsweek.

Newspapers: Although the elders did not read news magazines, they all kept abreast of things through newspapers. These included the two major newspapers in our state, the Minneaspolis Star-Tribune and the St. Paul Pioneer Press. They also read our local weekly paper, Wright County Journal, and The Drummer and Buffalo Shopper (two local news and advertisment papers). All of them admitted, as most of us would, to reading the tabloids while waiting in line at the supermarket. The Star was mentioned--but only for its crossword puzzles!

Daily Functional & Environmental Print: The elders' lists of functional print is, as expected, quite long. I will list just some of the items. These included: doctors' orders ("read them again and again"); prescription instructions; junk mail; advertisements on television; road signs; signs and notices in the community center and in their apartment complexes; menus at the community center and at restaurants; recipes; labels on cans; shopper flyers; price tags; tax forms; calendars and notes on calendars; greeting cards; various brochures; mottos on kitchen walls; telephone books; ads on billboards. The specific texts within these categories vary widely, for example, "a casino ad on the billboard," "a tomato soup can label," "a recipe for a lemon drink," and "a sympathy card for someone who passed away."

Letters: None of the elders was on Internet, and they all believed in the importance of communicating with letters. They all said that they still received letters from friends and family on a

regular basis. Moreover, as they reflected upon their lives, several members of the group reported that they went back and reread letters from the past. One woman noted that she had reread letters of congratulations on the birth of her first child in 1944. Another whose husband died after our group had been meeting for about a year said that she reread old letters as she sorted through his belongings.

Church-Related Texts: All members of the Senior Class are committed Christians and active members of different religious denominations. Their reading reflected this committment. In addition to regular reading of the Bible mentioned above, they read from Bible study booklets and courses. Prayer books, prayer cards, liturgy books for mass, hymnals, daily devotional pamphlets such as "Our Daily Bread," and magazines such as Catholic Spirit were all reported. The elders also noted that they read the posters and announcements in church and the weekly church bulletins.

Other Texts: Several members of the group are active in one or more singing groups, for example, the "Goldenaires," and they sometimes travel out of town to perform at different venues. They reported reading, and often brought into our workshop, song books with lyrics and music to old favorites and religious hymns. The elders also read the work written in our workshops. I will discuss this reading below in "Impact of the Weekly Writing Workshop."

In his analysis of the NALS data, Smith points out that only "1% of adults 65 and older read all five contents [newspapers, books, magazines, personal documents, and work documents] on a regular basis" (Smith, 1996, p. 208). Clearly, as we see above, members of the Senior Class are atypical; they read across all of the contents (with the obvious exception of work documents) and read these texts on a regular basis. Their wide and regular reading illustrates Smith's contention that "reading a variety of print contents is strongly associated with superior literacy abilities" (Smith, 1996, p. 215).

Writing

Literacy is more than reading, however. The NALS findings highlight literacy proficiency and practice as reading while giving scant attention to writing. Likewise, Weinstein-Shr's fine summary of the literacy needs and resources of elders in the United States includes a discussion of the "literature that examines the reading habits and interests of the elderly, [and] the functions of reading for older adults" (Weinstein-Shr, 1995, p. 10) but contains no similar discussion of writing. Thus, the NALS findings and related studies must be complemented by investigations into the kinds and frequency of writing that elders do. The writing of the Senior Class members presented below is one attempt to understand the specific "community contexts in which older adults manage daily living" (Weinstein-Shr, 1995, p. 22).

One kind of writing all of the elders did since the formation of our group is that which they completed for our weekly workshop. This writing included a variety of discourse forms: memoirs, fictional stories, poetry, essays for a contest, and children's books. Most of this writing would not have been done without the context of our weekly workshop, and I will discuss this in detail in the following section, "Impact of the Weekly Writing Workshop."

Outside of the pieces completed for our workshop, the most common forms of writing among Senior Class members were personal letters and different kinds of greeting cards. As discussed above, these elders believed in the importance of communicating through letters and cards. They liked to receive them, and they liked to write them. Letters were a means of maintaining connections with children and other family members who lived far away. They also helped one of the elders reestablish connections with a childhood friend with whom she had lost touch for many years. All of the elders reported on their literacy audits writing at least one letter or greeting card.

Greeting cards have a special place among this group of elders and the other elders at the community center. There is a rack of recycled cards for sale at the center (written names and messages have been whited-out or covered with white labels), and they include birthday, holiday, and condolence cards among others. Greeting cards are attractive, contain poetic and personal messages, and by their very nature require limited writing. Thus, they are

easy to write and send. For example, the oldest member of our group reported writing "three messages in birthday cards to grandchildren" during one week.

Like any group of adults, some elders wrote more than others. Various individuals in the Senior Class reported writing daily and using writing in expressive and poetic ways. One woman had a children's picture book complete with paper cut-out illustrations when the group began. During the next year she worked on several subsequent drafts. As I write this she is trying to find a publisher. Another member of the Senior Class wrote three different children's stories with religious themes for her church's youth group. These illustrated booklets were sold as a fund-raiser.

One individual had a folder of poetry at the start of our workshop and continued to add to it. Another woman kept an extensive diary. Two of the elders are husband and wife, and they both recorded significant events and times of their lives through memoirs and stories. One woman wrote brief chatty pieces for the "Senior Signpost" section of our weekly local newspaper.

All of the elders in the group reported doing functional writing each week. For example, they wrote lists of items needed at the supermarket and pharmacy; copied recipes; completed catalog order forms; wrote checks; worked crossword puzzles; made to-do lists; took notes at meetings; and itemized bills for state and federal

income tax forms. This kind of writing was an integral and, as one member said, "necessary" part of their lives. It was simply something people did without a great deal of thought or creativity.

After working with these elders for eighteen months, I found writing to be more "natural" to them than I find it to be among children, adolescents, university students, and many younger adults I know. They were never reticent in our workshops to write or to try a totally new form of writing, for example, haiku and cinquain poetry. This habit of writing was something that they had developed over their long lives, large portions of which were lived in a rural context before the advent of television and the relatively inexpensive long distance telephone call. I also suspect from our discussions that it was rooted in their early school experiences which emphasized the copying of passages from literary texts and the memorization of poetry.

Impact of the Weekly Writing Workshop

Our weekly meetings have had a significant impact on the writing and reading of the elders. The writing workshop served as a catalyst for extended writing. In the literacy audits the elders made such comments as: "started to work on writing assignments for class"; "wrote article for class"; "finished poem for Wednesday class"; "story for Wednesday"; "writing piece for Wednesday class." Clearly, more than half of the elders would not have regularly written stories, memoirs, and poems without the weekly group meetings. Thus, a

primary effect of the writing group was not only that it fostered writing, but that it fostered a range of written discourse. One woman commented recently, "I only used to write things in prose, you know, stories. Now most of the things I write are poetry. I didn't think I could."

The weekly workshops also contributed to the reading of a range of different texts. The elders read one another's work. They read, and enjoyed, short stories and poetry that I shared, works they most likely would not have encountered by themselves, for example, the poetry of Cesar Vallejo, William Stafford, and the Nobel laureate, Wislawa Symborska. They read works that various members brought in, for example, poems by Robert Frost, prayer-poems, "Casey at the Bat," articles and editorials from the newspaper, reminiscences from several magazines for elders, selections from local oral histories, numerous greeting cards and wedding announcements, and the writing of their grandchildren. Individuals also read particular texts in relation to pieces they were writing. For example, one woman was working on a contrast between today's Ford Taurus and the old Model T of her youth. This led her to the local Ford dealer who supplied her with several pamphlets and brochures on the Taurus.

Weinstein-Shr (1995) discusses the various functions of reading that we find among elders. The writing workshop fostered several of these which I believe are most important: the awakening of memories; personal renewal; the seeking of enlightenment; and

the cultural transmission to youth (Weinstein-Shr, 1995, p. 11). It did so not only through reading but also through writing. The connections I made with one fifth grade teacher and her class resulted in a number of intergenerational writing projects both in the community center and in the fifth grade classroom. These sessions allowed the elders to share their pasts with children and to learn more about the youth of today. One member of the Senior Class commented, "I feel hope for the future. Eveything you read about young people isn't true."

Indeed, the writing workshop helped us celebrate literacy as a community endeavor. In addition to the different projects with the fifth graders, we held an authors' celebration at the local intermediate school for a joint publication. Parents and grandparents of the children attended as did teachers, the principal, and a reporter from the weekly newspaper. An article then appeared in the newspaper, and several elders and children participated on a local radio talk show. The elders also held a reading at the bookstore in our town, and it was a success. Lastly, as I write this, a couple of the elders, some of the fifth graders, their teacher, and I are preparing for a presentation we will give at a state affiliate conference of the National Council of Teachers of English.

The writing workshop became a source of connections, friendships, and community. The elders became an identifiable group, the Senior Class, and through their talking, writing, reading, and sharing were able to enter into one another's lives. As one man

commented to the group, "You know, we've gotten to know one another better than most of the other people we know." The rest readily agreed. Moreover, the elders have paired up at times in person or over the telephone as they were working on a piece. One man taught two of the other members how to use the computer. Three of the writers have planned a joint publication of their work.

Lastly, this sharing, sense of community, and cohesion as a group resulted in a risk-free atmosphere. The elders felt free to address serious issues for which they had no other regular forum, for example, aging, death and dying, racism, and failures of will and courage. They were able to explore these topics in depth and with a frank openness. Tears were sometimes shared as authors read their work, and on more than one occasion we all sat in silence for minutes as the author collected himself or herself in order to continue reading. The supportive comments which followed such a reading always gave the author inspiration to risk again.

Impact on Personal Lives and Psychological Well-Being

Various issues face and affect older adults (Merriam, 1983). Among these are: developing and maintaining self-esteem; maintaining relationships with family members and others; and adjusting to loss and grief (Water & Goodman, 1990). Old age also is a time for reflecting on our lives, what we've done or failed to do, what we hope yet to do, and what we want to leave for posterity. Butler (1975) calls this reflection and reminiscing of the elderly a

"life review" in which they work through memories again and again in order to deal with unresolved conflicts, ideas, and events.

The life review is not a simple process, however. Studs Terkel's (1995) oral histories of the elderly have shown us that. As Moody (1993, p. xxiv) contends:

> Life is not simply "there for the asking," any more than a life story exists, ready-made, in memory waiting to be called up by a retrieval program. As with a recursive mathematical function, the telling of the story becomes a part of the story itself.

The telling of their life stories in prose and poetry allowed the elders in the workshop not only to explore their pasts but also to see them again more clearly and differently. The life review through writing helped them deal with loss and grief. For example, one woman's husband died after our group had been meeting for about a year. Her subsequent writing focused on different dimensions of their life together. She commented on how the writing and talking "helped her accept it." Similarly, one man wrote and wept over an incident in which he watched a gang of teenagers brutally beat another. His failure to act was a never-healed wound in his conscience. He wrote and told the story in several different versions.

The weekly workshop with its open format and opportunities for multiple themes and topics is especially appropriate for elders exploring their lives. Ronald Blythe (1979, p. 12) observes:

> Seldom do the very old deal in epic. They specialise in flakes of colourful minutiae, as if they know that, when they are dead, it is not great deeds from their maturity which will recall their individual tones, but the way they described a a day on the river long ago. . . It is the compulsion to piece together a true self from all the fragments which have no place in the official file.

And this is what occurred in our weekly workshops: elders wrote vignettes of their lives, glimpses of their pasts, flakes of colorful minutiae that helped give shape and meaning to who they were, are, and still might be. As one woman said to me, "Frank, the thing I want to do is to write memorable letters to my children and grandchildren, you know, something they'll remember me by."

This piecing together of a true self from fragments of our lives does not occur in isolation. The minutiae have meaning and take on resonance in our public expression of them. "It is <u>not</u> in our private worlds that we will discover the secret of reminiscence and life review in old age. Instead, we will find that secret in the structure of the stories themselves, and in the disciplines of poetry, history, and autobiography" (Moody, 1984, p. 158). The weekly meetings, and range of writings, readings, and discussions have allowed the elders individually and <u>communally</u> to explore and express their loves, hates, hopes, doubts, joys, and sorrows.

And the sorrows, fears, losses, and concerns for the future were always there as a common thread to our workshops. The elders wrote of the death of children and other loved ones, being on the

"home stretch" and their own future deaths, missed opportunities in life, the "ups and downs of life," "being an old car on a used car lot," disappointments in love and work, and the injuries they might have caused others. Of course they wrote also of joy, humor, and fond memories of people, things, and events, but it was this thread of grief that gave vigor to much of their writing and discussion. As Cohler (1993, p. 115) observes:

> Indeed, distress seems to be a major organizing factor in the life-story construct within our own culture. . . Stories dealing with a response to affliction provide a means for integrating the presently remembered past experience, present, and anticipated future into an account that makes sense of lived time.

Ultimately, the weekly writing workshop gave the elders somewhere to go and something to do. It filled a deep need in the lives of several individuals. The eldest member of the group commented on several occasions how she used to wake in the middle of the night and lay in bed depressed. Since joining the group she said that she now keeps a pad of paper and pencil by her bed. When she awakes she jots down ideas for stories and writes poems. Harrower (1972, p. 81), a psychologist and poet, maintains that by writing poetry "a period of potentially stagnating depressions may be averted, and the individual reoriented to more positive goals."

Similarly, one man who wrote and spoke passionately of his life said to the whole Senior Class at the end of a meeting, "This group, all of you, keep me on an even keel. My doctor at the VA [Veterans Administration Hospital] says you're my unofficial therapy group." A

woman with multiple physical difficulties said to me after she had missed several meetings due to illness, "Frank, when I miss, I feel that there's something missing in my life." Thus, while my primary purpose as a literacy educator was to promote writing and reading among these elders, we see that the weekly workshop fostered among them such attendant or complementary purposes as to avoid depression and to decrease loneliness (Rane-Szostak & Herth, 1995).

Implications for Other Elder Writing Groups

Several immediate implications are apparent from this particular writing group, and they might be relevant to other groups comprised of elders from different backgrounds and living in different contexts. Let's briefly consider them.

First, this group was successful because of its long-term and on-going nature. The elders formed a bond, a sense of community, during the eighteen months they had been writing, reading, and talking together. Their relationships and understanding of one another deepened over time, and thus they felt greater freedom to explore more sensitive topics and to engage one another in a forthright manner. A risk-free environment cannot be developed in a few weeks or during a brief workshop. Longevity, continuity, and commitment are vital for a sustainable and fruitful program for elders.

Second, although I often provided guidance and structure, the elders were in control of the workshop. They naturally determined the flow of discussion, topics, and themes to be explored. There was no preset curriculum to which they had to respond. Moreover, they controlled the workshop cooperatively and read, wrote, and talked in a collaborative manner. The workshop highlighted the social over the individual and in doing so helped each individual flourish in a supportive environment.

Third, the workshop followed a format based on the notion of the Self as storyteller: "the Self telling stories. . . [which includes] a delineation of Self as part of the story" (Bruner, 1990, p. 111). Ultimately, almost everything the elders wrote could be seen in terms of the life-review. Accordingly, the emphasis of the workshop was on the narrative, personal, and expressive:

> Focus on expressive aspects of language and literacy, in contrast [to functional, instrumental emphases], may entail reading fiction, writing poetry, recording oral history, or otherwise using literacy in celebrating or lamenting the human condition. (Weinstein-Shr, 1995, p. 19)

Fourth, my role was not limited to that of teacher and facilitator. Rather, I acted as a catalyst by following up on the elders' discussions and comments: I brought in thought-provoking texts to read and share; encouraged them at times to further probe a particular topic; and shared my own writing as a demonstration of how it was safe to tackle sensitive issues and memories. In effect, I was an initiator of the life-review process. Zavatsky (1984, p. 175)

maintains that "it may not be the elderly person who initiates the life-review process at all, that the child or grandchild (or a surrogate figure) coming with questions, at whatever age, has a significant role to play in it."

Conclusion

There is a paucity of information on the literacy functions and uses of the elderly. Perhaps now that the first Baby Boomers are turning fifty there will arise a greater interest in the literacy of older adults. This present study is one attempt to give us a glimpse into the writing and reading of a particular group of old folks. A great many more such studies are needed, studies which are rich with descriptions of how elders from different racial/ethnic and socio-economic backgounds, living in different contexts, and with different levels of education and health engage writing and reading.

National surveys are useful, but they only give us statistical portraits of abstract individuals. We need more particularity, more research infused with the spirit of Studs Terkel's oral histories: work which is "not so much a gathering of individuals, survivors leading passionate lives, as it is about enclaves, helter-skelter, with these singular beings as metaphor as well as flesh" (Terkel, 1995, p. xv).

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